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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000649

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/S
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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT RESHUFFLES CABINET; SIDELINES
VICE-PRESIDENT

REF: LILONGWE 579

1. (SBU) Summary: President Mutharika has reorganized his Cabinet, removing the portfolio of Vice-President Chilumpha and demoting the Minister of Information. The President also fired the Minister of Mines and the Environment, promoted the Minister of Home Affairs to Minister of Agriculture, and created four new Deputy Minister positions. The moves are a clear sign that the President is trying to sideline his VP, while rewarding his supporters with new positions. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The President took away the Ministry of Water Development from the Vice President, combined it with the portfolio of Irrigation and gave it to Gwanda Chakuamba, former Minister of Agriculture. Chakuamba is the head of the Republican Party, one of the main parties supporting the President in Parliament. This seems to be both a move to further sideline the VP, and to answer criticism that the government has not done enough to develop sorely needed agricultural irrigation.

3. (SBU) Ken Lipenga, the embattled Minister of Information, has been demoted to Minister of Labor. Lipenga had fallen out of Mutharika's inner circle, complaining to Embassy officials that he was unaware of major decisions made by the President until after the fact. He is being replaced by Patricia Kaliati, former Deputy Minister of Local Government and Rural Development. Kaliati is a particularly perplexing choice, as she is a political novice with a weak command of English and no previous experience working with the media. The President appears to have selected her either for her loyalty, or because he desires to take a more active role in the Ministry himself.

4. (SBU) Eunice Kazembe, the outgoing Minister of Mines and Natural Resources, had been appointed Minister of Trade and Private Sector Development at the outset of the Mutharika administration. She was demoted to Mines in the last cabinet shuffle. The reasons for her more or less continuous fall from favor are not clear, but they may include her reputation for corruption. As Ambassador to Taiwan during the Muluzi administration, Kazembe directed a majority of Taiwanese university scholarships to close relatives, including her children. Reliable sources have reported that she has vigorously solicited equity participation in privatizations and other deals. In addition, she has failed to align herself with the President's new party and is reputed to still have close ties with Muluzi.

5. (SBU) Uladi Mussa, former Minister of Home Affairs, has been promoted to Minister of Agriculture. This is a big step up for Mussa, a Muslim who is known as a good politician, but a questionable administrator. He has served in Parliament since 1994, and previously served as Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Minister of Natural Resources and environmental Affairs. Though he has faced some challenges as Minister of Home Affairs, he seems to be a rising star on the Malawian political scene.

6. (SBU) Comment: All of those promoted into new positions appear to have been selected mainly for their loyalty to the President and his new party. As reported previously (Reftel), trust is proving to be a critical issue for Mutharika, who is still struggling with political enemies from his old political party (some of whom are coy in their opposition, a category that includes Vice President Cassim Chilumpha). With no natural base of his own, he is groping for support within Cabinet. As well, it is clear Mutharika is trying to raise the government's level of effectiveness, particularly in the politically sensitive areas of irrigation and press relations. This is not li